

Lifelong Learning in the New Millennium — A Shared Responsibility Approach

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INTRODUCTION

An adult educator must have a professional commitment to best practice and any best practice approach must include an obligation to provide students with flexible alternatives that meet the demands of not only their learning needs but also their personal lifestyles and workplace commitments. This must be supported by a personal commitment to lifelong learning and the value of workplace and life experience.

Any adult educator that embraces these concepts will recognise that non-classroom teaching methods offer them the opportunity to guide students through a positive experience of independent learning with an emphasis on action learning, self-directed learning and reflection on action. Personal experience has been that it is a shared expedition of professional learning, personal development and joy.

Smith and Spurling in *Individual Lifelong Learning Accounts: Towards a Learning Revolution*, argue that the existing fragmented, provider-led arrangements for education and training must be replaced by a responsive, learner-led system; and that a culture of lifelong learning must be developed throughout the population. Policies to achieve change of this magnitude will need to be thoroughly designed, have the range to support learning throughout the lifespan, and the reach to cover the whole of society. This view places the onus on learning communities, academic institutions and educators to create innovative, learning opportunities that address the needs of all. This must be achieved while grappling with the impacts of changing social relations in the economic, political, social, cultural and environmental areas of the world.

This perspective lays the foundations for the approach I chose to complete the spiralling series of research, projects and practice implementations that are the basis of this paper.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The approach to this project has been very much one of grounded, action research. This accounts for the spiralling emergence of several projects and the fact that the research and its outcomes are evolutionary and never-ending. It also accounts for the involvement of all the stakeholders, particularly the students, at all stages. The focus was on their interests, concerns and issues and how they could be met within the managerial requirements of the Canberra Institute of Technology and the National Training Agenda. The experience has been an interesting and fruitful learning process of being conveyed on an evolving and revolving 'merry-go-round' of research.

'Grounded Theory does not represent a change in philosophy and scientific thought' [Glaser, 1998, p.44]. 'It requires some theoretical and social sensitivity, and the ability to maintain analytic distance, while at the same time drawing upon theoretical knowledge and astute powers of assimilation of data which allow concepts to emerge, that patterns of data indicate' [Glaser, 1992, p.12].

Dr Rosalie Holian cites Pam Swepson's paper, where she advocates that '...Action research in your own organisation can offer opportunities for exploring links between theory and practice, enhance identification of options, assist decision making and engage organisational members in on-going reflection and feedback as to how to better meet desired objectives'. Swepson used the action research process to '... undertake a fairly ambitious action research project...' in her own organisation. The project was aimed at addressing '...organisational issues and solving practical problems using action research techniques and approaches...'. Having '... incorporated these into [her] management style [she found that] this approach served [her] well ... using aspects of action research to address organisational re-structuring, a merger/take-over and downsizing in several different organisations.' [Holian, R.1999. online]

Since the Institute was undergoing similar changes, and there was a high degree of resistance, grounded action research was chosen to pursue change and understanding at the same time. The cyclic process that alternated between action and critical reflection, continuously refined methods, data and interpretation providing an emergent process. It was a participatory process so change was achieved more easily because those who were affected were involved in the change process. The process promoted the acceptance of change and addressed resistance issues in a positive way that recognised the needs of all involved. [Dick 1999 online]

BEGINNINGS

The first assessment project had its origins in the staff room of the Department of Community Development in 1996. The original project began with a search for a valid assessment process that would provide grading options; became a pilot program conducted in 1997 and has in turn extended through 1998/99 to become an integral part of the assessment processes and delivery structure of the Department. The research emerged as an expedition of discovery into, and the endorsement of, an effective alternative course delivery system that is learner centred.

The Cultural Shift

The cultural shift needed to embrace these concepts began for me at a workshop on Workbased Learning. I attended the workshop seeking insights into flexible assessment strategies and came away with a new paradigm for education. A paradigm that I envisaged could widen and deepen participation and achievement in learning. A strategy that I believed had the potential to initiate a process of empowerment through learning and to set in motion a process that is the basis of learning for personal development and social change.

When adapting to meet the future directions of any educational organisation, ... 'teachers and managers have to learn new skills, new rules and new techniques. Most important is for them to become advisers, rather than authorities or superiors who control.' [Burns 1995 p224]

Major role changes occur when moving from teacher-centred learning to the facilitation of self-directed learning. It was necessary to incorporate techniques that promoted learners' involvement in planning for, and thus accepting responsibility for, their own learning. This self-directed learning approach promoted a belief system that established learning as a normal part of workplace activities. This required the acknowledgment that valid learning does take place in the workplace, outside the realms of traditional academia.

The ensuing major cultural shift met a widespread range of challenges. It has been a 'cultural revolution' to turn a vision of innovative, flexible, approaches to assessment and education delivery into reality. Radical changes in attitudes towards traditional teaching and assessment strategies were necessary to construct a culture of flexibility that could move towards creating a lifelong independent learning approach. The scale of the task was huge. Initially the need for such a major cultural shift had to be spelled out, argued and taken on board by all the stakeholders.

This revolutionary change in attitudes and approaches signalled the shift towards greater involvement of students in their own learning. The confines of students' own resources and the level of commitment they are prepared to invest in their own learning limit this. I contend that best practice embraces these principles. Teacher and student have a shared responsibility in the education processes.

SOME CONCEPTS

Online Delivery

Warner, Christie and Choy (1998) state, '... that to assume that good flexible delivery must include a reliance on technology ... is a misrepresentation and a misperception'. Another major criticism of online delivery is that it creates a gap between the 'haves and have nots' of learners. A survey of 87 students in semester two, 1999 showed that 72% of our students have limited or no access to computers and the internet and consequently have poorly developed skills in using the technology needed to be successful online. A similar survey of the community sector's non-government organisations showed that 56% of organisations do not have access to the internet and 60% of staff

has limited access to computers. This promotes an access and equity problem. Even when students are given the choice of learning online their lifestyle and workplace constraints make this mode of study unavailable to them. On-campus access to technology is limited and requires learners to be on-campus to access it. This does nothing to alleviate the need to work, the need to meet family commitments or any of the various other reasons that people express the need to study off-campus. Technology is not the panacea of flexible delivery. It is a component of flexible delivery.

Flexible Delivery

Flexible delivery is about offering alternatives that meet the varied needs of learners. It is about providing the supports, strategies and resources that independent learners need to be successful. Flexible Delivery has created a major shift in how educators and students think about teaching and learning. By allowing students to learn in locations that are more convenient and often at more convenient times, a flexible approach to education opens educational opportunity to previously un-reached populations. It also enables more people to extend the period of their education from a limited number of years to a lifelong learning process. In addition, it changes power and authority relationships between teachers and learners, often encouraging more equal and open communication than occurs in conventional educational settings. It promotes a shared responsibility within the learning process. However, students need to know that their teacher is accessible and willing to be involved in the learning process. Success depends on the development of a learning community that interacts. A person's desire to participate in an educational program often is the result of a changing personal, social, or vocational situation. Consequently, programs must be designed to satisfy the interests of participants. In the Department of Community Development, this individual orientation has resulted in the creation of a continually changing, dynamic delivery program, able to respond to the varied needs of society.

THE SPIRAL OF PROJECTS

Graded Assessment Project

The project team aimed to find a quality framework for flexible assessment. The flexible assessment strategy developed involved a CIT-based traditional classroom delivery mode incorporating managed work-based projects. It is an enhancement of the traditional on-campus delivery with a field placement component. These reality-based projects involve the student developing a concept proposal based on their own research and then negotiating with an agency to form a working partnership. The teachers provide guidance and support for this process and assist in the clarification of project goals and planning.

A combined internal/external assessment panel for graded competency based assessment is used. This involves assessing, complex integrated tasks that include researching, designing, planning, developing, implementing and evaluating a community-based project. The establishment of additional criteria assesses differing levels of excellence. The non-graded are skills based criteria - graded criteria are based on the practical application of underpinning knowledge and other subjective areas

Evaluation

Evaluation of this delivery and assessment strategy involved interviews and feedback from agencies and field supervisors. Interviews were conducted on video, at the end of the panel presentations and during supervision sessions. Students were interviewed by their field supervisors, by the coordinator of the project and by other members of staff. The information gathered was then collated to establish an overview of opinions from the learners. This evaluation process helped us to develop an understanding of the learners' perspective. We felt this was important, as the focus to date had been on the merits of different forms of assessment. The feedback from learners and industry supervisors raised issues around the need for further support services and resources for Guided Independent Learning in the workplace. Reflection and action on the issues raised brought positive and sequential outcomes that provided impetus and focus for the future.

A large proportion of the students are working adults who attend some classes or workshops and are finding Guided Independent Learning a more satisfying and manageable way of learning.

Richard Felnagle, Mesa Community College, Maricopa states that research in that institution has shown that '... students should be offered meaningful choices [and] should be able to customise their work to their particular needs and wants'. (1997,p5)

Broadening the Concept

The concept was broadened to allow students to conduct relevant research in the module of that title for a semester before starting their project. This was implemented when past students indicated that the research stage of their projects had taken longer than anticipated.

The Department provides resources to facilitate the completion of relevant research that identifies the need for their proposed community based project. The project is chosen by the student and there is immense flexibility in the way the project is completed. Consistency is maintained through the assessment criteria. This allows the teacher to avoid the use of rigid formulas with no opportunity for student input. The students take control of their own learning and make relevant choices regarding the research needs, methodology and methods to meet the desired outcomes of their project. The learning is made more relevant to their current or anticipated workplace and they have the opportunity to develop and grow within a framework of their own interests and satisfaction.

New Role for the Teacher

The ongoing reflection on the processes and outcomes indicated a change in the role of the teacher. It became apparent that when we allowed the student to take control of their own learning it was important for the teacher to monitor and guide the processes. The teacher becomes the motivator, the 'bridge-builder' to promote transition to independent learning, the information provider and research leader. It is important that teachers provide the stimulus and facilitate interaction between groups, and between students and industry. This process moves the learners towards becoming independent to the point where the teacher role becomes a diminishing one of support and encouragement. The learner moves towards accepting a greater responsibility for their own development and learning, progressively becoming a self-sufficient, self-managing, integrated, effective worker in the field.

Online Support Classroom

As support was identified as a high priority by students and industry supervisors, and since we had an existing online classroom within the Institute, all teachers in the department were given training in using this resource. It was not meant to deliver online programs but provides an important support resource for students. Some students had access to the Internet at home others used the campus library. Library staff members were provided with accessing processes for this resource and they assisted students throughout the year. The online support included class announcements, discussion groups and provided underpinning theoretical knowledge resources and references. An online chat was conducted once a week for those that could access the internet at that time. All of these resources were accessed continually and proved important supports for most students. Others who did not have access were not overly concerned and many indicated that they did not want to use them as they felt they would be confused by the technology.

Print-based Study Guides

The fact that some students did not have access to technology led us to consider that some learners may be disadvantaged by not having access to the online classroom. Consequently, another spiral began and print-based learning guides were developed for all modules. These learning guides are also used in the classroom to provide consistency across the course. This new development provided the impetus for further fleximode opportunities within the study programs we deliver. Studying off-campus was now a real option for learners who were in the workforce. Students now had a choice of on-campus and off-campus study, they could choose a mixture of both, workshops were developed to deliver underpinning knowledge and theoretical concepts, the workplace could be used for the practical application of concepts learned. This flexibility in study modes allowed us to develop partnerships with industry for the workplace delivery of some programs.

A Meeting Place

Another question to ponder. Since it was apparent that some learners did not have access to a computer or the skills to use one, were they being disadvantaged when it came to compiling and

presenting their final report? All learners want to give the best presentation they can before the panel and they should be supported to do so, they should not be placed at a disadvantage. They would have access to administrative support in most workplaces and working teams would have a wide range of skills to utilise.

It was from this aspect that we requested from the faculty a space for learners and learner groups to meet. We then provided a computer in that space. The space was located in close proximity to the teaching staff and the coordinator of the workbased learning projects. The coordinator and the teachers provided support in learning skills such as desktop publishing, binding, compiling and collating information, research report writing and various other computing and presentation skills. This space proved so popular that students now have to book time in advance. The location of the space fostered the feeling that teachers were accessible and willing to be involved in the learning process.

Staff Training

The department organised training for staff in the facilitation of the Online Classroom, Teachers of course have to take the opportunity to develop these best practice skills. However, it should be noted that teachers who did not avail themselves of these opportunities, were not committed to the changing focus of education within the department, have left to work in more traditional areas of the adult education system.

There have been many discussions and debates along the way that have brought new insights and ideas into the procession of questions that are part of the spiral of this research. As a result, the department now has a vital, working and integrated team that is focused on quality of learning within a learner-centred model of education delivery. We have a high spirited, innovative team that is ready to meet the challenge of future questions that arise from evaluating outcomes.

Fleximode Delivery Options

Over a period of two years, the Department has implemented a range of delivery strategies including CIT-based delivery incorporating managed work-based projects; a combination of on-campus and workplace delivery; workplace delivery in partnership with the employer; workplace delivery in partnership with the employee and print-based external studies. All are now an integral part of the education delivery process and are used to provide students with choices to study flexibly.

A New Structure in Fleximode Delivery

Evaluation of the outcomes showed that some students who chose to study in fleximode were not succeeding. They were using the study mode as a means of not attending classes and/or did not have the motivation, support and skills to be successful in this study mode.

To counteract these negative outcomes we have now introduced a structure where students are required to complete an application to study by fleximode. The application form addresses their awareness, accessibility and experience in the field. Completion of this stage requires them to then complete a self-assessment quiz that highlights their understanding of the expectations, their supports, their motivation and their skills for successful study off-campus. This is followed by an interview with the coordinator of fleximode study where possible negatives, strengths and weaknesses are discussed so that students make an informed decision about taking on this demanding type of study.

Web Page

Our new web site allows students to arrange their own email address to encourage and support communication. We have incorporated a Student Support Sub-Site that incorporates a chat line and a threaded discussion. This site is accessible by all students but is pass-worded for the use of our students and our Department only. The web master uploads overheads, lecture notes, assessment details and any other resources used in the classroom or workshops as provided by teachers.

Some teachers have allocated chat times for the modules they are teaching. The chat is semi-structured to maintain focus but loose enough to allow some innovative and exploratory discussion. Students are again encouraged to participate in the discussion and chat lines. They are also encouraged to start their own discussion groups on course related topics. Topics must be relevant to the course, educational issues or needs, or social and political issues affecting the community.

Conclusion

Many hours, many late nights and lost weekends have been devoted to this project. The spiral keeps growing and the department keeps expanding, students are a continual source of inspiration and as a teacher, my strength and awareness keeps deepening.

Learners come into our courses looking for support and guidance to achieve. When we meet that challenge and take on a shared responsibility then those learners can be successful as Guided Independent Learners and leave as self-directed learners. Accepting a shared role in the learning processes demonstrates an ongoing commitment to the learning and growth of your students and to your own professional development as an adult educator.

Any approach to the development of lifelong learning as an element of social capital should be in laying the foundation for a fundamental change in attitude towards social pedagogy.

The focus needs to be on generating an interest in lifelong learning, which should increase the demand for learning opportunities. This demand should be especially fostered among those that are traditionally marginalised within or excluded from the traditional learning environment. This can be done by the implementation of strategies that will alter this group's aspirations and desires for social capital and engage them in learning in a variety of modes.

A revolution in attitudes is needed to make the shift towards a new millennium that promotes a sharing of responsibility for lifelong learning. An approach that allows individuals to have more control over the development of their own learning.

The range of issues and strategies that have been experienced in implementing a flexible approach to Guided Independent Learning has been the beginning of a move towards a sharing of responsibility in the development of learning partnerships between student and teacher. These strategies have allowed learners the opportunity to increasingly accept more responsibility. These initiatives allow learners to invest more of themselves in their own learning thus enhancing the desired sense of shared responsibility

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